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Overview – Michelle Rhee, March 3, 2011  
by David Yawn

A nationally recognized educational authority's speech at the Economic Club of Memphis addressed a timely issue for local audiences. Michelle Rhee, founder and CEO of StudentsFirst, a 170,000-member political advocacy organization that works on education reform issues, addressed a packed and attentive ballroom on March 3rd.

Rhee spearheaded education reform as Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools system where her requests for a system-wide overhaul were met with resistance. Rhee, however, gained the support of DC mayor Adrian Fenty and affected drastic and measurable improvements.

Mayor Fenty appointed Rhee to lead a school district of over 47,000 students in 123 schools in 2007. After first turning down the offer, she subsequently agreed if guaranteed broad decision-making authority to institute radical change. Through a tenure of three years, she helped turn the worst performing school district nationally into the only major city system to see double-digit growth in state reading and math scores.

During her work in D.C., Michelle and the teachers' unions agreed on a new contract that offered 20 percent pay raises and substantial bonuses for strong student achievement in exchange for weakened teachers' seniority protections. Her administration fired more than 200 teachers, the vast majority of whom received poor evaluations. Under her leadership, the graduation rate rose by 3 percent and enrollment rose for the first time in four decades.

Rhee's success and notoriety have helped propel her current organization's status nationwide. Despite opposition by teachers' unions, Rhee expressed her support for teachers and their right to collective bargaining. She stated to the Economic Club that the instruction of children should be the primary factor in all education-based decision-making, taking priority over seniority, tenure and privilege. She stressed an emphasis on merit-based, measurable progress in the classroom and the incorporation of a business-oriented approach.

Rhee stressed identification of best practices to support district reform and to strengthen the caliber of teacher performance, particularly in high-need districts. Clearly, teachers must be committed to student achievement, she elaborated. Not minimizing their role, Rhee acknowledged teachers as the most powerful tool we have.

"We must face the problems we have in public education in America and identify what we need to do to get the country back on track," Rhee said. "It will be difficult, but necessary. In each instance, we've got to go find out what's going on with the money and whether it is producing real results. People must be accountable for their job responsibilities."

Rhee also emphasized that educational decisions must be made independent of political

considerations, advocating against school boards. “We need more leaders to recognize that to produce significant change, you might not be very popular. For some reason, in public education (nationwide), we tend to sugar coat things and not talk about realities. The problem is that when people are most concerned about keeping approval ratings high, it sidesteps the greater need to be transformational. Be ready to fight the tough fights.”

Continuing, Rhee said, “As a country, we have gone soft and lost the spirit that made us great and it starts with our children. We are training our children to celebrate mediocrity and it percolates up to the next level.”